

3-13-2008

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Recommended Citation

Potier, Beth, "International Maritime Experts Discuss Arctic Accident Response March 18 - 20 At UNH" (2008). *UNH Today*. 380.
<https://scholars.unh.edu/news/380>

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International Maritime Experts Discuss Arctic Accident Response March 18 - 20 At UNH

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March 13, 2008

Reporters and editors: Nancy Kinner and Amy Merten, the UNH and NOAA co-directors of the Coastal Response Research Center, will be available by phone Monday, March 17, 1:00 p.m. Eastern Time to discuss the goals and objectives of the workshop. To participate in the call, contact Beth Potier at beth.potier@unh.edu or 603-862-1566.

DURHAM, N.H. - A cruise ship carrying 1,400 passengers - and several hundred thousand gallons of fuel oil - runs aground in the Arctic in September. The ship is unstable and all passengers and crew, some of them injured, must abandon ship. What does a search-and-rescue effort look like in this remote Arctic area? How will pollution response be mobilized?

As the Arctic Sea ice cover rapidly retreats, disasters such as this one won't remain hypothetical for long, says Nancy Kinner, co-director of the Coastal Response Research Center (CRRC) at the University of New Hampshire. The CRRC will convene an international team of experts at UNH March 18 - 20 for a three-day workshop to discuss risks to human safety, the environment and Arctic communities in this and several other Arctic disaster scenarios. The workshop - which is by invitation only -- represents the first time such a broadly representative group of experts have gathered to plan for Arctic maritime disasters.

"This is a new frontier, but these incidents will become more and more likely," says Kinner, professor of civil and environmental engineering at UNH. "We know how a tanker spill or similar disaster can affect the coast of Louisiana, but the ice-impacted Arctic, where it can be dark all day, is a very different scenario that hasn't been explored yet."

Amy Merten, co-director of the CRRC for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), notes, "We will determine how we can best respond to spills and other events in the Bering, Beaufort and Chukchi seas. We will also evaluate the environmental threats to communities and resources from such events."

Participants at the meeting, called "Opening the Arctic Seas: Envisioning Disasters and Framing Solutions," will assess the most likely threats to the region, resources and data needed to respond to maritime disasters, training requirements, and international cooperation issues. Participants are high-level leaders with relevant expertise in spill response, search-and-rescue, maritime shipping, fisheries, ice dynamics and the oil and gas and cruise ship industries. Representatives from indigenous Arctic communities, as well as from the U.S., Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark/Greenland, and Finland, will attend.

At the meeting, participants will discuss and plan for five distinct scenarios: the cruise ship grounding; an ice-trapped and damaged ore carrier; an explosion on a fixed drilling rig north

of Alaska; a collision between a tanker and fishing vessel that results in a large oil spill; and the grounding of a tug towing a barge of explosives in an environmentally sensitive area near the Bering Strait.

"We want to learn what we need to know to address these likely scenarios," says Kinner. "What resources do we need to solve the problem? Where will they come from? Where do we need more research? How can we move forward?"

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